Dear Mike:

For some years now, I have been conducting research into contemporary Chilean science fiction, drawing from my own experience as an author, editor, activist, and advocate of the genre. My purpose is to leave a documented testimony of the movement I was part of, which revolved mainly around *TauZero*.

It is a recurring notion among scholars that Chile has a notoriously short memory. Some attribute this to Chile's seismic nature and its susceptibility to natural disasters, which forces us to rebuild every so often. Consequently, the prevailing mentality seems to be: "Why preserve anything old if we must practically start from scratch?" I am reminded of what a prominent Chilean architect—whose name escapes me—once said: "Our urban planners' favorite sport is demolition, leaving no stone unturned for the solace of memory." This assessment can easily be extended to our culture at large. In Chile, there is also a pathological urge to be the first at something, always at the expense of predecessors, influences, masters, and tradition itself.

In Chile, nobody looks further because we refuse to stand on the shoulders of giants; their very existence is either ignored or outright erased from history. This is orchestrated so that certain individuals, usually lacking in talent and skill, can peddle a false sense of originality. When combined with widespread ignorance and a general lack of interest in fact-checking sources, they frequently get away with it. Furthermore, no one cares to debunk them, given the meager value ascribed to science fiction and culture in general.

I'll give you a real example. In the year 2000, the "First Comics, Science Fiction, and Fantasy Convention" was held at the Estación Mapocho Cultural Center from May 4 to 7. The following year, from November 22 to 25, another event called "MISIÓN SANTIAGO 2001" took place at the same venue and was also promoted as the "First Comics, Science Fiction, and Fantasy Convention." Not a single person said a word about it, not even those who organized the actual first convention, who had no relation to the later one.

Presently, I observe a lack of recognition among science fiction and fantasy writers for the contributions of those who paved the way. Rarely does one encounter a mention of earlier Chilean authors as sources of inspiration or influence. Esteemed Chilean writers, such as Hugo Correa, and more contemporary figures, like my late friend Sergio Meier, find acknowledgment primarily within academic and historical circles. Furthermore, only a handful of academics have delved into the field of contemporary Chilean science

fiction. A couple I could mention would be Patricia Espinosa with her essay "Panorama narrativo chileno siglo XXI: La revancha del neoconservadurismo" ("Chilean Narrative Landscape in the 21st Century: The Revenge of Neoconservatism", published in 2010 in *Revista Cultural*, number 1, 2009, Ediciones Corriente Alterna); and Macarena Areco in her book *Cartografía de la Novela Chilena Reciente: Realismos, Experimentalismos, Hibridaciones...*" (*Mapping of Recent Chilean Fiction: Realisms, Experimentalisms, Hybridizations*..." Ceibo Ediciones, 2015).

Regarding *TauZero*, I'll copy and paste a fragment of the essay I'm working on: "*TauZero* was a science fiction and scientific ezine featuring Hispanophone authors that set trends in Chile during the first decade of the 21st century. It was published as a PDF magazine from February 2003 to March 2008, and continued as a blog until 2011. I (Sergio Alejandro Amira) served as the editor and layout designer of *TauZero*—in addition to contributing illustrations and texts—from February 2003 to October 2006, when I voluntarily stepped down from my position, though I continued to collaborate. During my tenure as editor of *TauZero*, twenty regular issues and ten special issues were published. Some of the most prominent authors we featured in *TauZero* were Jorge Baradit (a very controversial and polarizing figure in Chile, especially after he became a politician), Soledad Véliz, Sergio Meier, and Francisco Ortega, all from Chile; Sandra Leal from Colombia, Sergio Gaut vel Hartman from Argentina, and Santiago Exímeno and José Carlos Canalda from Spain. We also published short stories by Greg Egan (*Closer*), Alastair Reynolds (*Zima Blue*), and Cory Doctorow (*I, Rowboat*), translated by me, with the explicit authorization of their respective authors."

In regard to the scientific dimension of *TauZero*, we published articles by Álvaro Bisama, Francisco Ortega, Omar Vega, and Eduardo Unda-Sanzana, alongside interviews with writers such as Sergio Meier, Francisca Solar, and Robert J. Sawyer.

Regarding the impact the magazine had in Chile, and perhaps elsewhere across Latin America:

It was successful within the tight-knit community of science fiction fans in Chile, and it briefly caught the attention of the mainstream media following the notoriety gained by Baradit. *TauZero* also crossed Chilean borders, attracting Spanish-speaking writers, even though a process of cross-pollination between digital magazines and anthologies was already well underway across Latin America and Spain at that time.

How easy/difficult was it to get it started?

It wasn't that difficult, as we already had experience and a base of readers and contributors, coming primarily from the *Utopika* portal and the *Fobos* fanzine. The history of *Utopika* can be summarized as follows. In 2001, Rodrigo Mundaca, who served as Director of *TauZero*, discovered a Chilean website called Utopika, which had been running for just over a year and defined itself as: "(...)a community of people with common interests in science fiction and fantasy, in all its expressions, preferably literature."

In addition, *Utopika* supposedly had ebooks for download (mostly pirated), but none of the links worked. Mundaca, outraged, sent an email demanding that they repair their page. The people in charge of Utopika wrote back to him saying, "We don't have time to update it, but if you want to, you can do it yourself." Considering that Mundaca was making a science fiction website on his own, the prospect of having a decent URL and the possibility of cooperating with a larger project led him to accept and become the administrator of *Utopika*, which continued to function primarily as a forum or message board where science and fantasy enthusiasts interacted.

The way I got to *Utopika* also has an interesting story. In the year 2000, *FIXION 2000* was held in Santiago, Chile (the convention I told you about before). As part of its activities, *FIXION 2000* hosted the "First National Science Fiction Short Story Contest," in which I won second place with "El libro de Shklovski". According to the book that compiled the winning stories, mine "was praised by the jury for its original way of approaching a classic theme within science fiction." (it was about time travel or something like that). It is worth mentioning that the jury was composed of Hugo Correa (considered the father of science fiction literature in Chile), Miguel Arteche (poet and National Literature Prize winner in 1996), and Luis Saavedra (co-producer of *FIXION 2000* and Director of the *Fobos* fanzine).

Due to the incompetence of the organization, I didn't find out about my second place until a year later. And so began my search for the book that published the winning stories, inquiring with fan clubs and people who had participated in the convention, until I came to *Utopika*, where the *FIXION 2000* book was scanned and uploaded as a PDF. That's how I met Mundaca, who directed me to Luis Saavedra, the director of the *Fobos* fanzine, as we already mentioned.

Fobos was a science fiction, fantasy, and horror magazine that, in the words of Saavedra himself, "was distributed free of charge in Chile, and had, neither a high print

quality (photocopied), nor a decent distribution (*Fobos* circulated almost hand to hand).” Nevertheless, *Fobos* set out to have as its goal the diffusion of the fantastic genre and the support of literary production written in spanish, in general, and in Chile, in particular.

Fobos was published between June 1998 and 2004 and until this day is the longest-running science fiction and fantasy printed publication in Chile, with twenty three issues (twenty in print format and three in electronic format). Because of my participation in the *FIXION 2000* short story contest, I was invited to join the *Fobos* literary workshop and, due to my knowhow in graphic design, I took charge of the fanzine layout starting with issue 15 (September 2002), in addition to contributing content, illustrations, and even co-editing an issue with Pablo Castro.

Now, the genesis of *TauZero* is closely linked to *Fobos* due to Luis Saavedra's refusal to accept Mundaca's proposal to make an ezine version of his fanzine. Saavedra still believed in the paper format at the time, even if it was a photocopy, so he declined the offer kindly. I was enthusiastic about the idea and offered Mundaca my help develop it, and in fact I was the one who named it *TauZero*, after the novel by Poul Anderson, of course.

How successful do you think it was?

The success of *TauZero* depends entirely on how one defines success. If by success we mean having created a common ground and a support network for science fiction fans and aspiring writers, then *TauZero* was highly successful. If we consider *TauZero* as the springboard that launched Baradit toward his status as a Chilean bestseller, it was perhaps even more successful. However, as for securing a stable position within the broader cultural landscape for other voices and alternative authors, *TauZero* did not succeed at all. It must be noted, though, that the magazine was composed of nearly 80% science articles, reviews, and criticism covering movies, series, and books. In terms of fiction, the publication of short stories was actually the content we developed the least.

Regarding Baradit, it is impossible to say definitively whether *TauZero* was instrumental in his meteoric rise. Perhaps he would have eventually achieved similar heights regardless of the ezine and the fandom, likely due to his own merit and perseverance. The signing of Baradit by a prominent publisher initially sparked a hopeful expectation that it would pave the way for onboarding further talent from within the

genre. Yet, such an expectation never materialized. The primary reason lies in the limited size of the Chilean market, both past and present. This restricted landscape offered no room for more than three or four additional authors, and those slots were already occupied by Francisco Ortega, Mike Wilson, and Álvaro Bisama. These writers dabbled in the fantastic genre, but from a perspective far more aligned with the commercial interests of multinational publishing houses. In fact, together with Baradit, they would form a self-proclaimed coalition known as the "uchronic mafia"—a mutual promotion and support group that quietly disbanded once everyone had accomplished their short-term career goals.

What feedback did you get on the magazine?

Outside of the science fiction community, *TauZero* didn't get much attention. There was a brief mention in the national newspaper *El Mercurio*, along with a few other print publications that took note of the magazine due to Baradit's success, wanting to know "where he hatched from." Unfortunately, this interest didn't last long—maybe a couple of months, being generous. We must take into account that, back then, science and science fiction, particularly in Chile, weren't nearly as popular as they are now. Not without regret, I recognize that *TauZero* is barely a footnote in the annals of Chilean science fiction history. But, then again, that's true of all such cultural initiatives in our country.

And, most importantly, what impact did it have on the sf scene in Chile?

I would say that it had a major impact on the scene because, at the time, the entire community was centered around *TauZero*, especially after *Fobos* came to a close. However, just like *Fobos*, *TauZero* eventually lost the modest relevance it had, although its decline took longer because our magazine's content remained accessible on the web to this day.

Those who read *TauZero* and have now become science fiction authors are unlikely to mention it publicly, for the reasons I noted earlier—the tendency to ignore or fail to acknowledge earlier efforts in a misplaced quest for originality. The ezine format is no longer popular, and even web pages are not widely read. In a world dominated by social media, if something is not published on TikTok, Instagram, or other current platforms, it simply does not exist. Since its demise, *TauZero* has only been mentioned in a few academic articles on Chilean and Latin American science fiction. Even more surprising is that those who participated in *TauZero* seem to want to distance themselves from the

magazine or even pretend that it never existed. I know this because a couple of years ago I was on the verge of publishing an anthology of short stories from both *Fobos* and *TauZero*, but I ultimately gave up due to the lack of cooperation and interest from the authors, some of whom were even close friends of mine.

What writers did you discover and develop?

The most relevant writer we discovered and developed is the one I have mentioned repeatedly so far: Jorge Baradit. While some of the Chilean authors we published, myself included, have continued their literary careers to this day, we never came close to the notoriety or popularity of Baradit. As for the authors from other Spanish-speaking countries like Spain, we didn't really discover any of them, as they all already had established careers. Now, let's review the stories published by Baradit in our ezine.

"La conquista mágica de América." *TauZero* #1 (feb 2003). Later published in:

Axxon 154, September 2005 (pdf Argentina).

Alucinaciones.TXT (Puerto de Escape, 2007, Chile).

Ellos son el futuro (Ficción científica, 2013, Spain).

Qubit. Antología de la nueva ciencia ficción latinoamericana (Fondo Editorial Casa de las Américas, 2011, Cuba) .

La guerra interior (Plaza & Janes, 2017, Chile).

El tercer mundo después del Sol (April, 2022, Minotauro, Spain).

Erídano n° 16 Doce imágenes de la ciencia ficción chilena (pdf, feb, 2008, Alfa Eridiani, Spain).

"Ygdrasil" (excerpt). *TauZero* #2 (may 2003).

Baradit's first published work in paper, released as a complete novel in August 2005 by Ediciones B and has since had seven editions).

"Mariana." *TauZero* #4 (december, 2003). Later published in:

Púlsares 2 (*Fobos*, 2004, Chile).

Also published as part of "*Trinidad,*" a compendium of three short stories that won *ex aequo* the spaniard UPC Award 2006, the story was also published in the anthology that compiled the other winning stories, titled XVI UPC Premio, published in Spain by Ediciones B in 2006.

Axxón (website, sept 2005, Argentina).

La guerra interior, Plaza & Janes, 2017 2006, Chile).

América fantástica. Volumen I (Panorámica de autores latinoamericanos fantásticos del nuevo milenio (Huso, april, 2019, Spain).

"Ángelica." *TauZero* #8 (julio 2004). Later published in:

"Trinidad," a compendium of three short stories that won *ex aequo* the spaniard UPC Award 2006, the story was also published in the anthology that compiled the other winning stories, titled XVI UPC Premio, published in Spain by Ediciones B in 2006.

Axxón 177 (pdf, sept, 2007, Argentina).

La guerra interior, Plaza & Janes, 2017 (Chile).

"Vampiros." *TauZero* #9 (sept, 2004), also published in *La guerra interior*, Plaza & Janes, 2017).

"Karma Police" (Originally published in fanzine *Fobos* #21 (april, 2004). It was later published in:

TauZero #14 (may, 2005).

Años Luz Mapa Estelar de la Ciencia Ficción Chilena (Puerto de Escape, 2006, Chile).

La guerra interior (Plaza & Janes, 2017).

Also adapted and published as a graphic novel with art by Martín Cáceres under the title *Policía del karma*, (Ediciones B, 2011).

"Trinidad." *TauZero* #21 (march 2007) (excerpt of "Trinidad", a compendium of three short stories that won *ex aequo* the spaniard UPC Award 2006, the story was also published in the anthology that compiled the other winning stories, titled XVI UPC Premio, published in Spain by Ediciones B in 2006).

What do you think were the most successful/important stories you published?

To be completely honest, only the stories by Baradit. Besides the *Ygdrasil* novel excerpt, these stories are:

"La conquista mágica de América." As noted earlier, it was published in seven anthologies: three times in Spain, once in Argentina, once in Cuba, and twice in Chile. It

undoubtedly became Baradit's most popular short story.

"Karma Police." This was later adapted and published as a graphic novel with art by Martín Cáceres, one of the most prominent comic book artists from Chile (*Policía del karma*, Ediciones B, 2011).

"Mariana" and "Angélica." As previously mentioned, as part of the fix-up titled "Trinidad", these stories won *ex aequo* the UPC Prize, awarded annually since 1991 by the Polytechnic University of Catalonia. This award is considered one of the most important prizes in Spain specifically dedicated to science fiction. In the words of Brian W. Aldiss, it is "the most prestigious science fiction prize in Europe." Baradit was the first Latin American and the first Chilean writer to win the UPC. The story was also published in the anthology compiling the winning entries, titled *XVI Premio UPC*, published in Spain by Ediciones B in 2006. The UPC Prize was a significant milestone in Baradit's career; it provided him with access to the Spanish market and helped propel his trajectory in Chile. In a country where international validation is always highly regarded, the UPC Prize provided a major boost for Baradit.

To this list of Baradit's greatest hits, I must add:

"Azul Zima" ("Zima Blue") by Alastair Reynolds, translated by S. A. Amira. Of all the short stories I translated by English-speaking writers, this one stands out the most because it later reached a mass audience when it was adapted as part of the Netflix series *Love, Death & Robots* on March 15, 2019.

I wish I did not have to focus almost exclusively on a single author when reviewing the history of *TauZero*, but Baradit remains an unprecedented phenomenon in Chilean literature, regardless of his literary quality or personal character. The old saying goes that where Attila's horse stepped, no grass would grow. In retrospect, this seems to be a very similar situation.

Sergio Alejandro Amira

1 February 2024